

Trump's Nuclear Policies

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The election of Donald Trump as leader of the 'Free World' leaves us with many questions and few answers. The uncertainty comes from Trump's unclear, changing, or non-existent policies. Imagining what this uncertainty may look like can lend some analytical clarity.

One could say there are broadly two schools of thought concerning Trump's foreign policy. The first literalist school takes Donald Trump for his word, believing he will follow through on his campaign promises based on largely [illiberal values](#). This would logically include scrapping the Paris Agreement, pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal, and perhaps allowing Japan to acquire nuclear weapons. The other more hopeful school, expounded by President Obama the day after Trump's victory, [Theresa May](#), and [other](#) Western heads of state, considers Trump's election to be business as usual – and they assume Donald Trump will follow diplomatic etiquette and international norms.

The two schools are helpful when looking at Trump's potential policies, but what do they mean for the Middle East, and especially its nuclear issues? President-elect Trump has already made various statements about the Gulf's nuclear situation. He has talked about the Saudi-Iran rivalry, opposed the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) bill, and most worryingly, hinted that nuclear weapons should be proliferated to US allies.

In January 2016, Donald Trump [said](#) that the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran threatens Saudi Arabia's existence, and that he would pull out. He also speculated that Iran would attempt to 'go into Saudi Arabia' and would get a nuclear weapon 'soon.' In such a case, he would [support](#) Saudi Arabia in 'any regional conflict,' but they would have to [reimburse](#) the US for its security guarantees. Mr Trump hypothesised the first phase

of such a conflict could be an Iranian invasion through [Yemen](#), its motivation being acquiring Saudi Arabia's oil and money.

Literalists believe that Mr Trump's criticism of Iran will continue. This would likely nullify Obama's diplomatic progress in the US-Iran relationship. It would then be up to a P4+1 agreement to save such a deal. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies would probably hope for such a move, to avoid the risks of Iran nuclear power efforts going unchecked. A more hopeful view suggests that Trump could be convinced by members of Congress, the Security Council, and even Angel Merkel to keep the deal. Future president Trump would then be the guarantor of peaceful nuclear power in Iran.

Donald Trump's support for Saudi Arabia puts him at opposite ends of Russia in the Middle East's 'bigger game.' Russia, together with Iran, are security guarantors for Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, while the US has traditionally supported Saudi Arabia and the Syrian opposition. For the literalist, Trump will need to [reconcile](#) the contradiction between being a strong Saudi ally and becoming friendlier with Russia. This will reveal how much of a realist Donald Trump actually is. If he chooses the Saudi side, on a grand strategic level, it's hard to see how he could put an end to the Syrian conflict without putting the US-Saudi relationship under further strain. The Justin Trudeaus and Angela Merckels of the world can only hope that Trump sees the US's business in Saudi Arabia as more important.

The JASTA bill is the only Trump position that we can be sure about. On 28 September, Donald Trump's campaign issued a [statement](#) on President Obama's veto of JASTA and supported its passing. Congress subsequently [overrode](#) President Obama's veto. The bill amended 'the federal judicial code to narrow the scope of foreign sovereign immunity,' in effect allowing families of victims of 9/11 to [litigate](#) against Saudi Arabia. The Saudis responded to the passing of JASTA with antipathy. They [claimed](#) the bill eroded principles of sovereign immunity. Russia [called](#) the bill an American disregard for international law, China also [said](#) the US should not put domestic law over international law.

In sum, the JASTA bill has been a controversial but minor issue in the United States and Saudi Arabian relationship. Yet, there are at least two ways this could unfold for the Trump literalist camp. Literalists say that he could make JASTA an issue in talks between the two countries. The bill, essentially a symbolic and domestic issue for the Americans, could add to the current souring of the bilateral relationship. On the other hand, Trump alluded to Saudi Arabia being his closest ally in the region. He could brush JASTA aside for continued security cooperation, weapons trade, and oil.

However, President-elect Trump's lack of clarity on nuclear proliferation is perhaps the most worrying of all foreign policy issues. Trump has not said whether more US allies should acquire a nuclear bomb. He has [hinted](#) that Saudi Arabia should obtain nuclear weapons and has made similar [statements](#) about Japan, which he later refuted. Trump also seems to believe that nuclear proliferation is inevitable, despite evidence to the contrary. His narrative is a perceived weakening of US influence around the globe. Allies are therefore not guaranteed protection, creating the need for alternative means of deterrence. US allies will therefore seek to acquire nuclear weapons. Literalists, therefore, have great cause to be worried. According to *The Washington Post*, Trump's isolationist promises, through withdrawal of military power from abroad, could additionally lead to an actual weakening of US military presence around the world. This in turn may lead to a [domino effect](#), where Saudi Arabia, and other allies, would acquire nuclear weapons.

Hopefuls, on the other hand, would say that the US still has the military *par excellence* globally. If Trump is convinced of this, he would see the need for upholding the Non-Proliferation Treaty, finishing Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, continuing the US pivot to Asia, and maintaining US military presence abroad. Upholding the status quo would negate a need for nuclear proliferation among allies, and would arguably create a more secure world order.

Despite Donald Trump's image of lacking foreign policy experience, he has strong opinions about the US's role around the world. What those opinions could mean for Saudi Arabia and the broader Gulf are US security guarantees (with remuneration) and cancelling the Iran deal. Most [dangerously](#), though, in 'putting America First,' Trump

appears to be marking the path to nuclear proliferation. Indeed, Trump's unclear stance on this issue will be a long-term source of concern.

It just depends on whether you believe him.